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Trending With TikTok: Bridging the Digital Divide During COVID Times

Selina Peña, Dr. Leo G. Cigarroa High School

Past, Present, and Future

Thirty-five years ago, I was birthed into the world right smack in the middle of the 1980s in a once small border town in South Texas. I was a part of a generation that possessed a typical Hispanic youth's old-school work ethic and attitude. I cherish the experiences of carrying 25 cents just in case you need to use the payphone, drinking water from the *mangera* (water hose), and experiencing the birth of the internet and the iPhone. Unlike most Hispanic/Latin families, Spanish was not my first language; Spanish was learned throughout the years from watching *telenovelas*, Mexican soap operas, such as *Dos Mujeres*, *Un Camino*, and *Pequeña Traviesa*, alongside my mother and grandmother. These moments and lessons I learned with my grandma carried me on my journey into secondary education. Growing up in my grandmother's neighborhood assured me of one thing: I would be attending Cigarroa High School as a teenager.

One of the first few established high schools in this small border town, my neighborhood high school was, and still is, one of the smallest secondary campuses in the city. This high school is my past, present, and future. My mother has been a part of my local high school since its inception in 1983, where she worked as an attendance clerk; she is now the secretary to the assistant principal. I spent most summers there and would even answer the phone and transfer calls to their destination. Who would have guessed that I would have found myself teaching at the very high school I saw my mother working in?

Taking Care of Business

I currently teach English I and II and Advanced Placement English Literature at the high school level. My classroom students are diverse as they range in abilities, gifts, and struggles. Diversity is also seen in the demographics that comprise the school. According to the school's 2020–2021 Campus Improvement Plan (2020):

the student body is mostly Hispanic (99.8%), of which 97.4% of them are economically disadvantaged and 65.3% are at-risk. The [English language] population is 34.4%, special education students are 11.6%, and mobility 16.5%. The attendance rate is 94.2%. Students in alternative school placements range from 45–65 students in the past 3–5 years. Students enrolled in Texas Institutions of Higher Education are 42.8% and 21.7% complete one year without remediation. Students graduating with [Advanced Placement] credit is at 49.6%, with 2 or more advanced/dual credit courses are at 40%, with 9 hours or more of post-secondary credit or 3 hours in ELA/Math is at 14.6%. (p. 6)

These statistics indicate the demographics of the community I have been a part of my whole life, and now I educate the very students who live in the neighborhood in which I was raised. I was an assistant softball coach for three years, and I continue to be the University Interscholastic League Literary Criticism Sponsor since 2015. I am a member of the District's curriculum team for high school since 2015. I am now the Co-Master Teacher for the English Department. In 2017, I was one of the first teachers to become a certified Apple Teacher. In this professional development, educators learned how to effectively and

efficiently use Apple products/programs in the classroom. In addition, I am a Google Certified Educator Level 1 and 2. During the 2018–2019 school year, I was awarded Digital Learning Innovator for Secondary Schools and was recently nominated again. I have always been one to know just how important it is to make technology part of educators' and students' learning processes.

Additionally, I am one of two English teachers teaching in the high school's early college academy. This early college within the comprehensive high school is a magnet program that aims to encourage at-risk students for college and career success. The program was recommended by a former principal and early director of the academy. While enrolled in the magnet school, students identified as at risk and economically disadvantaged are provided the opportunity to receive their high school diploma and at least 60 credit college hours toward a degree, all at no cost to students. Since most students who attend the comprehensive high school are economically disadvantaged and considered at risk because of previous state-assessment failures or outside home factors, this academy has given many students a chance to earn college credit when they might not have otherwise.

Working From Home

As teachers transitioned into the uncertainty of education in a pandemic, concerns, anxiety, and frustration grew out of their voices. However, teacher voices were silenced as they took ever-changing orders coming down from the top, starting from, but not limited to, the U.S. Department of Education, state agencies, and the school district board. I would need to find a way to have my voice be heard. I had always felt that the merge of technology and education would be inevitable. I kept

trying to find different technological avenues to blend with some of the traditional classroom modes. The use of educational platforms and video series such as Google Classroom, NoRedInk, and Ted-Ed allowed me to be more efficient in instruction and assignments. In turn, teaching semester-long classes appealed to the needs of the students—those who participated in extracurricular activities, part-time jobs, and/or responsibilities at home to help them stay on track and provide accountability and support when needed. I was interested in using technology to interpret students' understanding of literary texts in more creative ways. That was preCOVID-19.

Within the COVID-19 education era, even though I embraced technology, I had trouble with the complete transfer to virtual learning. Even though the school provided one-to-one laptops, my sociodemographic community still endured their struggles: access to reliable internet, family obligations, and so forth. As their teacher, if I struggled without the students' presence in my classroom, I know my students must have felt the burden and stress of not having their teachers within physical proximity amidst their virtual education.

Teaching is about adapting. It is the only thing that remains constant and consistent—teachers' ability to adapt. After the pandemic started, I felt my reach and voice were muted. I felt my impact was nonexistent. Those overwhelming feelings of hopelessness and voicelessness forced me to seek another means of connecting with my students: TikTok. It became a catalyst for impact/expression. It brought back the social aspect of working in education from which educators and students thrive. It is imperative, as a teacher, to stay relevant and understand the generation in my classroom to make lessons relatable.

“Virtual Insanity”

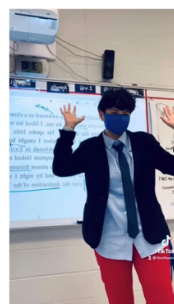
I downloaded the TikTok app as my friends shared videos with me: funny videos, recipe videos, Amazon buys, and trends (i.e., challenges, dance, etc.). Then, I recalled how I used YouTube to teach myself Math to tutor students when I worked for a tutoring company. Being self-aware, as a teacher with attention deficit disorder (ADD), I knew I could stay engaged with a TikTok video's length that only lets you record/post a video with a maximum one-minute duration. When planning a lesson, I find it helpful to create with *me* in mind since I have the attention span of a high school student. My struggle with ADD has given me a perspective not afforded to other educators. I can see why some students struggle, which allows me to create a lesson spiraled in chunks. Chunking helps break down difficult concepts to organize and synthesize information, enabling the teacher to check for comprehension using different types of formative assessments. I saw the potential in creating lessons, but similar to many educators, I had so much on my plate that I could not and did not have sufficient time to get in the creative space to transfer that idea into fruition.

Entering the 2020–2021 school year, I found a TikTok Teacher community where educators encouraged one another during this pandemic. When I saw the time was waning or when I was stressed, creating a funny video related to being a teacher provided me a little escape. On July 6, 2020, I posted my first video that went viral. I did not understand the impact of that just yet. The teacher community provided videos that helped ease the transfer to virtual learning. I had created a couple of videos that highlighted educational tools and how to use them, and I shared them with the teachers in my department. Before the school year

began, my school administration encouraged teachers to create a welcome video for their students. On August 21, 2020, I posted a video introducing myself to English II students and explaining how they could contact me. Keep in mind, I consider myself an introvert. Making these videos allowed me to practice in front of a camera on how best to deliver information, which helped me take hybrid teaching to a new level (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

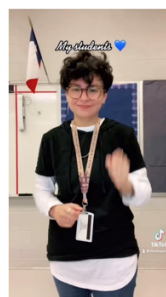
Hybrid Teaching via TikTok



Since I introduced myself in video form, I asked my students for a video introducing themselves on the first day (see Figure 2). It is important to note that I did not want them to post publicly. They only needed to use the app to record and edit, post privately, download, and upload on Google Classroom. I wanted to see them and wanted them to express themselves since I did not know when I would see them physically in the classroom.

Figure 2

A Screenshot of My TikTok Creation, Introducing Myself to Students



Now, fast forward to December 7, 2020, when students were in the middle of the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) testing week; this is the state's standardized assessment. The TikTok app provides creators with a bank of audio clipped from music or dialogue to support a creator's video content; these audios are known as sound. Creators can choose from a premade sound or import their own. I heard this untitled sound, "There's a fishing pole, reel it in ..." on TikTok, and I quickly connected this to how writers can compose an introduction for an essay (see Figure 3). I made the video and posted it. I showed it to my students while reviewing it. On TikTok, though, the reception was beyond anything I could imagine. Teachers, parents, and students enjoyed it. They shared it with others, posted it to their online classrooms, and recreated it. I was over the moon and humbled.

Figure 3

Screenshot of My TikTok Lesson, Introduction to the Essay



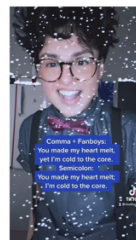
On December 9, 2020, I posted a video, expressing how I am not like other educators, that transitioned to a clip of me teaching hybrids in the classroom. This video went viral. Students are always intrigued by seeing teachers "behind-the-scenes" or outside of school settings. Since then, I have created relatable videos, promoting positivity and kindness, teacher humor, instructional strategies, and trending

sounds in Spanish with translations. In addition, I have started targeting popular songs to help get rid of the students' negative stigma for poetry.

In my videos, I utilize LED lights with different colors to represent imagery and engagement. Thus, a student in special education who needs sensory modifications and support can refer to a short and engaging video to learn and then apply the lesson. I also label lyrics with a specific literary/poetic device so that teachers may use them in their classrooms with the intention that students can learn how to explain why particular lyrics are labeled that way. Filters are also helpful in grabbing students' attention and helping them connect to the teacher's lesson (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

A Screenshot of My TikTok Lesson, How to Use a Semicolon



In a persuasive/argument video, I utilize the song "The Other Side" from The Greatest Showman to emphasize key strategies in producing an effective persuasive/argument paper. In another video, I use "Red" by Taylor Swift to teach a lesson. Using the artist's lyrics, I change the lighting to specific colors to emphasize the message she conveys. For my students, music is a part of their everyday lives regardless of genre/language. Therefore, they can find an emotional attachment to the song or lyric, explain why they feel that way, and relate to the author's overall message.

Outcomes and Lessons Learned

Social platforms, such as TikTok, help teachers bridge the educational and technological divide. The TikTok platform has been a support among teachers. For example, teachers post videos on utilizing technology such as Google Classroom and Zoom and tips on creating a Bitmoji classroom. In addition, they provide some humorous content relatable to teachers that lets them know that they are not alone in this trying time. This platform provides another outlet to disrupt homogeneous thinking. For example, I assigned my students to interpret and reenact, in a video format, either an introduction to the character Grendel or Beowulf. I provided a rubric and guidelines so that they could meet expectations. The result was outstanding. One student used the song “Heroe” by Enrique Iglesias as Beowulf’s entrance onto the scene. When tackling poetry, English learners are more confident in participating when they can utilize songs in their native language and then translate them. Since TikTok videos are no longer than a minute, the platform allows the creator to chunk information that is most beneficial to the student or produce a product that measures their comprehension.

And similar to most social media platforms, TikTok brings about many concerns to school districts, administrators, teachers, and parents. Some issues that are concerning are bullying, since users can comment on each other’s videos, the lack of privacy when creating an account, and the possibility of being hacked. In addition, some TikTok videos contain explicit content with which parents may not be comfortable. The concerns are valid. However, one should not be discouraged because TikTok does provide options to decrease such potential outcomes. One can turn off comments on videos, manage screen time,

utilize restricted mode, and report any suspicious or bullying behavior.

The power of social media has been used negatively; however, it can be used in positive ways, as well. If people in power and social standing can evoke sentiments of hate and violence on social media, why not use the same power of social media to raise awareness, educate, and spread positivity? Educators should not be afraid to use the platform that this generation utilizes—at times a form of escapism, acceptance, and laughter—to engage with them. If a teacher fails to engage or gain the trust of their students, it becomes difficult for students to trust and allow that teacher to teach them.

Though many people are fighting to have TikTok banned, which would lead to discontinued use in the classroom, there is still hope. The idea that TikTok gives educators a platform to voice their thoughts creatively and share those ideas with colleagues is monumental. Even more so is the educator’s ability to use this dance-creating, food-making, and hobby-liking app to educate their students. TikTok spokesperson, Hilary McQuaide, shared that they “support [TikTok’s] creative community in continuing to share their voices, both through the platform and the legal options available to them, and we are committed to continuing to provide a home for them to do so” (Lerman, 2020).

Conclusion

The goal was never to become *TikTok famous*. I just wanted to utilize the platform to teach outside the box. Teachers are thrown different educational platforms and strategies, and the way to overcome that stress of something new is through trial and error, which is evident from my earlier videos. Teachers try to instill a growth mindset in their students, and the same should apply to educators. Teachers have

proven themselves repeatedly to rise above and surpass obstacles thrown at them, as seen throughout this past year. If one teacher can change someone's world inside a classroom, then many teachers can change the world, even with a screen in the palm of a hand in the middle of a pandemic.

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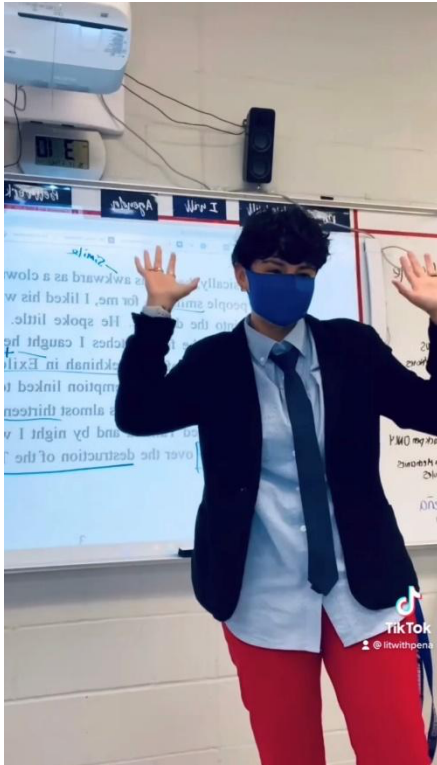
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Appendix A

Figure 1

Hybrid Teaching via TikTok



Appendix B

Figure 2

Screenshot of My TikTok Creation, Introducing Myself to Students



Appendix C

Figure 3

Screenshot of My TikTok Lesson, Introduction to the Essay



Appendix D

Figure 4

Screenshot of My TikTok Lesson, How to Use a Semicolon

